The Cancer and the Cure: Security, State and Power in Mexico

De Rosa, F. & Godeghesi, C1.

Abstract

This paper aims to understand the role of the Mexican state in a drug war context and the impact of Mexican drug policies to its institutional legitimacy. In this sense, we will discuss how the institution adopted security policies as counter measures concerning the narco-traffic. Such militarized action adopted by the Mexican government, in addition to the support offered by its neighbor United States, echoes how society imagines the use of force within public policies. In this sense, the main question is how the use of violence becomes central in the public policies’ formulation and why it represents an attempt to re-claim power and legitimacy. We will assess how this conception of public policy formulation does not encompass the dynamics in which violence emerges. This effort regards ultimately the final manifestation through which actors conduct violence, focusing in a unilateral conception of monopoly ownership. The paper will offer a critical discussion focused on violence and its role as an instrument of power and as a main part of the monopoly of state control. Our central argument is that the Mexican government takes for granted other power relations implementing those policies. Such concerns should embody policy formulation in order to understand violence and its manifestations inside Mexican society regarding narco-traffic.

“Sé que México enfrenta un gran problema de seguridad. Éste es un cáncer que se ha venido incubando durante años y al que no se le dio la debida atención, pero es un cáncer que vamos a erradicar”

Felipe Calderón Hijinosa

Introduction

From 2006 to 2012, violence in Mexico has skyrocketed. The Mexican NGO Seguridad, Justicia y Paz ranked five Mexican cities as the most unsafe ones out of ten in Latin America in 2012. The most critical is Ciudad Juarez, which by itself corresponds to 1,974 homicides, second overall in the region (Seguridad, Justicia y Paz, 2012). This information illustrates the Mexican political and institutional landscape: the conflict between the state and drug cartels, in which the death tolls account over 45,000 since 2006. The power conquered by these drug trafficking organizations granted them

1 Felippe De Rosa, MA Candidate at Instituto de Relações Internacionais, IRI, PUC-Rio. Catherina Godeghesi, MA Candidate at Instituto de Relações Internacionais, IRI, PUC-Rio. They are thankful for the support by FAPERJ and CAPES, respectively.
the ability to control parts of the Mexican territory to run their operations and spread violence through the several confronts between these groups.

In 1994, the Mexican president Ernesto Zedillo’s administration began implementing new policies aimed to fight the drug trafficking, which were essentially militarized actions. This has happened with a broad support of the United States’ government, embedded in their own War on Drugs rhetoric, since the drug trade in Mexico also directly affects them: the latter works as a trampoline between drugs that come from Latin America aimed to reach the American consumer market.

This militarization process also reflects as a reaction to the growth of the logistic capacity of the drug trafficking organizations, which logically culminated in an upgrade of their confrontation capabilities during the 1990s. Ioan Grillo (2011, p. 75) in his thorough account of the drug war, points to the fact that from the 1970s to the beginning of the 1990s, these organizations, commonly known as cartels, were still shaping themselves without any specific hierarchy or structure. The globalization process was ultimately responsible to trigger the consolidation of their power. Not only they became “professionals” in drug logistic, counting with jets and sophisticated systems to manage the transportation of the drugs, but also with military trained personnel, often former members of the Mexican army trained in special divisions (Grayson, 2011; Gootenberg, 2007).

This debility arisen from the narco-power created an appalling prospect on Mexico’s stability and institutional strength among neighboring countries, mainly United States. The conflicts between rival cartels began to spark in early 80’s and increased until its peak in the ongoing drug war (Grayson, 2011, p. 2-3). The lack of control within the territory and subsequent incidents targeting the population spread insecurity throughout the country. Conservative authors and columnist in broad-diffused Mexican newspaper instated that this insecurity spike “exhibits the impotence of [Mexican] its branches of government, the futility of its laws and the incompetence of its leaders” (Aguilar, 2008). Impotence and, as Javier Hurtado (2008) puts it, the complete vulnerability of Mexican citizens, uphold a “failed State” stigma, characterized by possessing a “soaring murder rate, a jump in sadistic executions. Increased kidnappings, prison escapes, the venality of local, state and federal police, a failure of policy makers to enforce safety codes and disenchantment with institutions” (Grayson, 2011, p. 4).
This apparent failure of state apparatus and legitimacy to control and protect their own national citizens and territory emerged both internally and externally as crucial contestations, (Rotberg, 2004). Felipe Calderon, a National Action Party conservative member sworn as president in December 1, 2006 amidst this pressure to increase law enforcement measures against the drug cartels. On December 11, 2006, only ten days after took his oath as president, Calderon declared a war on drugs, undertook with “no truce or quarter to the enemies of Mexico”. Understood in terms of a strict physical threat against the Mexican state and its citizens, this was a measure to “recover calm day-to-day life of Mexicans” (Grillo, 2011) and, as Ramirez Acuna stated, Calderon’s interior minister, “we are looking to take back the spaces that organized crime has seized.” (Associated Press, 2006).

The initial operation and its mechanisms in Michoacán gave a general outset prospect of the incoming war. Inscribed mainly in military terms, 19 planes, 38 helicopters, and 4 ships collaborate in diversified task such as capturing suspects, establishing checkpoints and burning marijuana and poppy crops (idem, 2006). The War on Drugs conception was a military operation to seize territory and eliminate the physical threat of violence over the citizens. With this in mind, the motivations behind this study breach from the necessity of taking a closer look at the political consequences of drug trafficking organizations growth in Mexico and its implications. Their acts impose severe challenges to the state power and its institutional apparatus, affecting the Mexican governmental structure and demanding a response.

The militarily actions from the latest governments undertook to disengage the structures of the cartels now face contestations. For instance, the death tolls related to drugs and kidnaps increased over the years, as well as parcel of the unsatisfied population over these actions. (Shirk, 2009; Molzahn Et Al, 2011). Such large-scale policies to fight the cartels eventually led them to a redraft in order to shift its structure. The ongoing tactics is to stretch their occupation all over the Mexican territory, to difficult the direct engagement, occupying larger parts of the territory (Gallup Institute 2009; 2012). Notwithstanding, parallel power relations derived from drug cartels ascension, and the interactions between the local/ global urban violence and state power embedded in new transnational flows are understated by analysts (Rotberg, 2004; Harroff-Tavel, 2010).
The Mexican government stressed policies that focused to fight these groups, hoping to contain the expansion of the narco cartels, both in terms of territory and military capability. Although their use was quite modest during Zedillo’s government, it increased during Vicente Fox’s administration, from 2000 to 2006, and boosted exponentially under Felipe Calderón’s government, which began in 2006 and ended in December 2012. The grounds to fight the narcotraffic were set upon the idea that the reason for its establishment was the evolution of the military capacity of the cartels. Mexico could only face this threat through the ostensible use of military apparatus, which would be the remedy of the situation. The illness of the Mexican state was therefore the drug cartels, and its cure the military intervention (De Rosa, 2012).

The recruiting and professionalization process that cartels have gone through linked the idea these groups as a threat to the state power in Mexico. However, this point of view does not encompass an analysis that accounts the whole cartels formation process; thus, it is unable to disarticulate the power structures that drug lords and theirs groups have built over this period. Prioritizing the army as the main solution relegates essential aspects that shape the current structures of this scenario to the margin, aside of consideration. In consequence, it focuses strictly on the most recent events rather than a broader understand its origins.

It is paramount to evaluate to what extent Mexican actions focus strictly on militarily actions, extensively using army and federal police, contributed to disarticulate violence embodied on narco traffic. In order to do so, it is fundamental to choose an approach that ponders the formation process of the narco traffic and interventionist measures carried out by the Mexican government throughout the years. Thereon, based on these particular structures, it is possible to analyze how the military professionalization process that occurred among the narco traffickers developed, which is the current focus of the government’s actions.

We do not aim here to analyze the ultimate demonstrations of the violence. Instead, violence is understood as a product of interactions between social, political and economic processes. The motivation behind observing the processes that are backing the violence is that the government’s policies should actually address the many factors that frame this environment, opposite to the above discussed use of militarized strategies. Such actions adopted by the Mexican government, in addition to the support
offered by its neighbor United States, reflects how public policies are imagined inside of a society.

Finally, this work intends to discuss and understand what the role of the Mexican state to build this drug war context. The main question that guides this work is how the use of violence becomes central in the public policies’ formulation and why it represents an attempt to regain power and legitimacy. As detailed above, we intend to assess critically how this conception of public policy formulation does not encompass the dynamics in which violence constructs itself, regarding ultimately the final manifestation through actors conducted it. Thus, our focus relies on the use of violence and its role as an instrument of power and as a main part of the monopoly of state control. The adoption of such policies by the Mexican government disregards other power relations. We propose a critique of this rigid think, suggesting a broader understand of violence and its manifestations inside Mexican society.

In order to answer those questions, this article has four sections: first, a theoretical and methodological consideration, to outline our theoretical approach on the matter, as well as a description of our methods and sources. Then, we will engage on two descriptive sections on the cancer – the narco-traffic as a threat and disease to the State body – and the cure – the military intervention. We drive considerations over this rhetoric of war and their implications in this particular diagnosis, highlighting the questions observed by those measures and the ones omitted. A brief conclusion follows this final effort, stressing important points assessed throughout the work and outlining an agenda for future research.

**Theoretical and Methodological Considerations**

The fundamental issues highlighted on the present essay try to understand the relations between the use of violence and legitimacy of state power. We try to underline that the policies adopted by the Mexican government vis-à-vis the drug war context are built on the application of militarized strategies. Violence is extensively on display and is a central point throughout process, implemented on a “war on drugs” against the narco-traffickers.

This rationale associates the use of force not only as a rational and logical counter to fight narcotraffic growth, but also as the fundamental demonstration of power
from the state. The war *with no truce or quarter* brought discourses later buttressed by Presidents and National Security Cabinet’s on the War on Drugs rhetoric. The way that the Mexican government jointly with the United States has addressed the narco-trafficking is a sheer representation of a public policy that displays the use of force as a synonym of efficiency. United States widely supported these policies and acted closely together in *Los Pinos* in order to bring order back to Mexico, developing later the Merida Initiative.

The theoretical framework selected in this paper tries to acknowledge these militarized and violent policies considerations as fundamental to state legitimacy. Pursuing such logic, the policymakers focus strictly on the use of violence by the narco traffic as a unique manifestation, taking for granted the network that this violence grows upon. Those policies play a particular emphasis on a unilateral monopoly of violence that establish institutional power and reinstate the state legitimacy.

First, it is paramount to analyze the Mexican response to the narco traffic and the rhetoric of war through the securitization framework lenses designed by Barry Buzan & Ole Waever (1998). The authors define the act of securitizing as one that brings the linguistic and political framework of the security field upon a distinct topic. In this case, this situation configures a situation of emergency. In an emergency, the use of force, widely understood as an exception, come as a rule. The use of violence ultimately becomes the rule itself.

According to Buzan & Waever (1998), the securitization process presents the securitized issue as an existential threat, which requires emergency measures. This actor trying to securitize a potential threat is only successful if a given audience acknowledges it completely. Therefore, existential threats in addition to emergency measures and expected effects among units lead to a successful securitization process. It can either have a formal or *ad hoc* institutional structure, and it must happen through a speech act (BUZAN et al., 1997, p. 25). For instance, a ruler must present an issue as a threat that must be widely accepted among the audience. Securitization must be legitimate through consistent arguments that aim to convince the society of the dangers of the threat. If it is indeed accepted, actors and institutions will translate it into effective actions (BUZAN et al., 1997).

The main contribution of Buzan et al.’s work to this paper is the referent object as a theoretical tool. Referent objects are entities whose existence shall be protected
through the extraordinary measures adopted on the securitization measure. In other words, the referent object is the threat’s target. Other key concept is the idea of securitizing actor, an actor who engages in the act of define the threat. Thus, security emerges as a product of references. This movement allows us to understand both what a security issue is and what is not. The state, thereon, defines its actions through the discourse, crafting policies on the idea that it shall guarantee state’s survival, and ultimately preserve its legitimacy. In sum, it is paramount to understand security measures, such as the ones undertaken by the Mexican government by realizing the fact that they correspond to a reference as established by who formulated it.

Michael Foucault (1977) sheds light on the tools to understand that the quest for the monopoly of the use of violence by the Mexican government omits important variables. Its policies are insufficient once it does not address the multifaceted and interactive power relations embedded in this context. Neocleous (2003) tries to understand on what the imaginary of the state is built upon and how the use of violence reflects that. Historically, several authors portray the state as a human body, invoking the idea of order. This buttresses the notion of the state as the ultimate ordering unit on society. Therefore, addressing the drugs as the cancer, or as an illness, requires actions underpinned by violence to recover its essence and order.

In order to understand Foucault and Neocleous’ contributions, it is necessary to observe the foundation of such understandings of the state and its monopoly of violence. Although understood as a core debate among the social sciences, it was Max Weber, in his book Politics as Vocation (1919) that has entrenched the feature of the Modern state reflects the monopoly of violence. This restricts the state to a fixed territory within which lies its sovereignty. Weber claims that this movement builds the essence of the Modern state, and allows him to analyze power in this context. Sovereignty, on the other hand, grants the state its agency as a political actor in the international system. Power and ownership of the monopoly of violence have become the core characteristics by which the state imagines itself. It also produces itself as the main and only authority and impinges order upon its population.

Domestically, this logic of violence reflects the adoption of public policies that aim to restore such position of who solely owns the use of violence. Consequently, this becomes a matter of power, survival and legitimacy (Neocleous, 2003). Foucault (1977) allows us to understand whether such quest for the monopoly of the use of violence by
the Mexican government is inadequate due to its failure to address the multifaceted power relations embedded within this War on Drugs context. Militarized acts disregard processes that structures violence on the two parts of the conflict: narco-traffickers and the government itself. It also disregards both its impact on society and how it can reshape its legitimacy in face of its own population. The genesis of the drug issue and its violent foundations provides useful information on how this process developed on Mexico. Thus, we try to emphasize that it is not sufficient to underscore the instability environment to adopt measures solely on the final manifestation of the cartels. It is essential to analyze and understand the structures which violence grows and builds itself upon before acting.

In his book *In Defense of Society* (1975), Foucault discusses how violence has been naturalized over the time within the “regimes of truth”. This discourse entrenches state power and restricts broader approaches to diagnose and treat violence. When nor perpetrated by the state, the state apparatus regard this actor out of the natural order of things, a true parasite on the sole organism of the state. Order and obedience, as well as violence become a flat phenomenon, rather than a complex process. It is dysfunctional in face of the monopoly of the violence which the state has exclusive ownership. Thereon, the use of violence appears as a simple and direct solution, a surgery to extirpate by a direct cut this anomaly. This set of movements end normalizing the use and exercise of violence (FOUCAULT, 1977). Neocleous’ also shed light in how the legitimization of the state depends on the creation of the enemy.

Neocleous (2003) follows a theoretical approach rooted in both Foucault and Marxism. In his book *Imagining the State*, he addresses how the state is conceived as a human being, with a body, mind and personality. Throughout History, this has invoked the idea that the state as the unit that produces order within a society. It legitimates practices of domination that take place under the name of the state itself. The body is composed by interconnected parts, dependent on each other. That grants a sense of unity to its sovereignty, and opposes to divisions and disintegrations. This notion also encompasses a hierarchy, that is, the head subordinates the other parts of the body and imposes cohesion. The state imagined as a body would intensify its power.

This process also rests on the creation of the enemy to the state, which is intensified by the use of the idea of body through speeches: the body is highly susceptible to illnesses. The enemy is a parasite that and there must be action to
eradicate it. In his words, “as Derrida argues, the body politic reconstitutes its unity and secures its inner order by aiming to exclude from its territory threats or aggression using whatever violence may be necessary” (NEOCLEOUS, 2003, p.36). He defends that the idea of medicalization of the state leads to violent measures. Therefore, in addition to what Foucault argued, the state, envisaged as a body, can suffer threats to its order or stability by an illness or something that a cure must extirpate. The drug war as the cancer and the military measures as the cure reflect these ideas. This reaction is not exclusive to the Mexican government. International community treats drug issue as a cancer or as something dysfunctional. The speeches as pronounced by the Mexican presidents set these bases to act, representing an authority transmuting violent measures as part of the imaginary of the state. Therefore, these actions are a reflection of it.

Finally, Moser & MacIlwayne (2004) provide us a framework that disrupts the strict relationship between the monopoly of violence as a feature of state control and power attribute. They contemplate a broader approach in order to observe the genesis of the process of violence within the society (MOSER & MACILWAYNE, 2004). The authors allow us to grasp whether state policies contribute or not in the referred disarticulation process of insecurity and fear using violence. These authors claim that this leads to the distrust of the population in face of its own government and institutions. It produces even more fear instead of the expected result, and lacks legitimacy.

In sum, the considerations based on the presented authors provide us the tools to understand how the Mexican government has identified a threat to its legitimacy, the cancer, and how the use of violence as its cure. The use of violence as a logical answer to the actions perpetrated by the narcotraffickers was normalized. Consequently, fear and insecurity grow exponentially amid the society, and the state loses its legitimacy. The use of the exception as the rule indicates that there are no boundaries for state action, which has the aforementioned negative effects. (LIRA, 1998, apud MOSER & MACILWAYNE, 2004).

Moser and MacIlwayne (2004) observe that the state acts arbitrarily and does not take into consideration what are the possible consequences of it. Both sides use violence in a mutual confrontation. Their analysis intend to broaden this scope and aim to understand how could the diverse shapes of social, political, and economic factors could interact within this context. The quotidian violence intertwines itself with several different factors that general analysis omit. Different power relations and structures
woven with the local and global structure and shape the different experiences with fear and insecurity, commonly known attributes of the society.

In sum, a security measure should take into account the many factors that shape these structures and relationships. Drug Cartels grow inside the state and represents a lacunm where the power of state does not either appear as sufficient or encompass this manifestation. This is the final objective of confrontations buttressed by complex social relationships and attributes, and none of them is responsible for the final act of violence by itself. In order to observe empirically how the Mexican government act on a rhetoric of military force as a cure to the narco-disease on the State, we shall observer the structures applied in speeches and statements. Therefore, the present essay will undertake a qualitative approach over these discourses to see the impacts that these discursive constructions have legitimizing the government apparatus and repelling the “failed” state-stigma. The article will proceed with a discourse analysis, focusing on the structures and articulations inside those speeches relating to operations against these drug cartels.

We will focus on the discourse made from President Ernesto Zedillo to President Felipe Calderón and its respective cabinets in order to assess the shift on the targeting and combat of those cartels. With the purpose to maintain methodological coherence, the discourses analyzed have national security as its main subject or mentioned as an interrelated matter throughout the statement. All discourses come from the same database, preferring to analyze primary sources2: The words to filter the results were “narcotrafic” and “national security” in order to organize data.

**The cancer: historic background and bases to act**

The origins of the drug production and traffic in Mexico lie in the opium prohibition in China. In the 19th century, the Opium War drove many Chinese to Mexico and other places around the world. Many of these Chinese brought poppy seeds with them and as soon as they established themselves in the Sinaloa region, in Mexico,
they began their local production. The northern region’s relationship with the drugs is not recent. The proximity of this region with the borders with the United States was an advantage, and the region quickly rose into becoming the core area for the operations ran between both countries.

The drug flow towards the United States increased the number of users and addicts in the country. The demand was high and this allowed Mexico to promptly take advantage of it. This quickly turned into a preoccupation among the white elites: the use of cocaine by the black men was linked to the rape of white women. Thus, the use of drugs acquired a racist connotation. In 1914, the American government undertook the first intervention that aimed to control the drugs that were trafficked into the United States. The Harrison Act would regulate both the production and consumption of opium and cocaine (GRAYSON, 2011; GRILLO, 2011).

Other measures regarding other narcotics and alcohol followed the act. In the 1920s, these policies eventually culminated into the full-blown prohibition of alcohol, called The Noble Experiment. Therefore, another opportunity loomed for the Mexican illicit market to act in the borders. Powerful mafias emerged in the United States side of the border and they networked with their Mexican counterparts. They created empires and profited from the illicit industries that besides drugs and alcohol smuggling, included prostitution as well (GRAYSON, 2011). In the 1930s, the PRI - Partido Republicano Institucional - ascends to power and remains until 2000 (RUSSELL, 2010). This marks the consolidation of the political power of this party. It would be responsible to maintain the stability in the country, establishing a peaceful relationship with the narco-traffic. For decades, they sustained a system of corruption for transportation that worked for both of them (GOOTENBERG, 2007).

The boom of both drugs production and consumption occurred as a reflex of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. Marijuana practically became a commodity, while heroin consumption also rose among the soldiers from the Vietnam War. Due to the rising market demand in the United States, the Mexican drug organizations assorted and expanded their productions. Mexican marijuana was high quality and its price would rise five times just as it crossed the borders (GRILLO, 2011, p. 42). Nixon responds to the rise of the traffic by creating special forces dedicated to eradicate the drug production in Mexico. He tried to reach an agreement with the Mexican government, which disagreed with the American proposals to deal with the issue. Nixon retaliates by blocking the border through the Operation Intercept (RUSSELL, 2010).
effectiveness of it was low not only because the drug trafficking organizations had alternatives to it but also the price of the drugs in the market rose. Only the small producers suffered losses by the operation.

In 1973, the American government created the DEA - Drug Enforcement Administration - to coordinate Nixon’s War on Drugs. Now that the Americans would be taking a closer watch at the borders, corruption rose. Las mordidas, as it was known in Mexico would soon become a new source of income to government agents. In 1976, also as a response to the progress of drug production, Mexican government launched Operation Condor. They sent the army to the region called Golden Triangle that comprised the states of Sinaloa, Durango and Chihuahua in addition to the release of herbicides over the fields. The American government supported the plan and this soon became a model to implement elsewhere such as Colombia and Afghanistan (LUPHSA, 1981). Both marijuana and poppy productions were burnt or infected. Because of that, the American consumers stopped purchasing the expensive and infected Mexican marijuana and turned to the cheap Colombian one.

This culminated into a major structure shift on Mexican drug trafficking: with a hard enforcement on Mexico, production was now located mostly in Colombia, which would also produce the now popular and expensive cocaine. In the 1980’s, Medellin gathered powerful groups of drug traffickers. These groups set fixed prices and political actions, what entitle them as cartels. In Mexico, however, these cartels worked in networks and as a trampoline so that Colombian cocaine could cross the border to the United States. Traditionally, the transport was done through the Caribbean. Florida would play an important part in this process until a task force was established by Reagan to end this inflow in the region. This was a considerable loss for most of the organizations, increasing logistical importance to Mexican border passage.

The small groups of middlemen quickly became rich and developed into complex organizations, especially due to the profit that the high prices of cocaine would generate. With the American operations now focused in the Colombian cartels, the latter began to fall. Because of that, the Mexicans would no longer be shareholders in the process; they would now supervise and control it. This triggered the rise of the Mexican cartels. The Guadalajara cartel was emblematic in this regard. It was responsible for two

---

3 This movement was after named as “balloon effect”, arguing that whenever there is pressure in one place, drug traffickers take their apparatus to other region, vice-versa. See more in MORA, Frank. Victims of the Balloon Effect: Drug Trafficking and the U.S. Policy in Brazil and the Southern Cone of Latin America. The Journal of Social, Political, and Economic Studies v. 21, n.2, p. 115-22., 2011.
important shifts in the structure of the Mexican drug market: in terms of mechanisms used for production and in terms of use of violence.

Drug production increased in conjunction with violence among cartels. The brutal murder of DEA agent’s Kike Camarena shifted the paradigms of the policies towards narco-trafficking. The United States put more pressure into the Mexican government in order to begin offensives to fight it. It was also during this period that the relationship between the PRI and the narco-traffic was formally accused. Because of this, the newly elected president Carlos Salinas, in 1988, ordered the prison of Felix Gallardo, one of the most important names in the Guadalajara Cartel. The cartel was subsequently dissolved into other small groups: Tijuana, Juarez, Golfo, and Sinaloa. This marked a new phase of the narco-traffic in Mexico and shaped the characteristics of the current militarized conflict.

The origins of the militarization of the cartels lie in the Golfo cartel. Osiel Cárdenas, one of the leaders of the cartel, wanted to expand his control. With this in mind, he hired former lieutenant of the Mexican army Arturo Decenas to form a group composed by well trained armed men. Decenas hired them straight from the army and inaugurated this new chapter in the conflict. These men had been trained in Israel and by special forces in the United States. (GRILLO, 2011; GRAYSON, 2011). The Golfo cartel wanted to reestablish its control over territories that now belonged to the Sinaloa cartel. However, by attacking a DEA convoy in an attempt to display its power, Cárdenas was arrested in 2003. In addition, Decenas had died in 2002. The group that was hired by Decenas was gaining strength inside the cartel by the extensive use of violence. They were Los Zetas, name derived of a radio code used by the police to identify this group of 30 former army soldiers now engaged in the traffic (GRILLO, 2011; GRAYSON, 2011). Los Zetas ascended as a rising force in the conflict.

In 2005, Los Zetas and the Sinaloa cartel began a dispute over territorial control. Because of their military capabilities, the Sinaloa cartel was surprised. The Zetas, therefore, changed the nature of the conflict by professionalizing and training its men specifically for combat purposes. In 2010, they had 10,000 soldiers (GRAYSON & LOGAN, 2011, p.10; GRILLO, 2011). Because of the growth of this cartel and its ‘civil war’ against the Sinaloa cartel, the other groups aligned to bigger cartels, diminished or even disappeared.

Nowadays, the narco-traffic in Mexico is controlled by these two groups: Sinaloa, that extends over the west of Mexico and a large portion of the border with the
United States, whereas the east side is under the control of the Zetas. The death tolls have surpassed 25,000 over the last year, with a significant increase after 2008. These two groups are expected to remain being the two main actors of the intra-cartel conflict (MOLZAHN et al., 2012; STRATFORD, 2012).
The cure: Military Operations and the rhetoric of war

Once we assessed how *El* Narco emerged on the Mexican territory, we will try to understand the use of force through military operations and how discourses enabled this possibility. We began these considerations defining what we understand by discourse and how these practices are important in the scenario. Jutta Weldes (1999, p.9-10), in her seminal book *The Problem of Cuba*, addresses how actors engage in behaviors based on the meanings these objects have for them. These meanings emerge as the cornerstone of collective action, therefore placing the struggle to define them on the center of what is civil society sphere.4

Weldes (1999, p. 11) argues that the imaginary of security grants the state authority and responsibility to act on behalf of a “national interest”, an appropriated image of these meanings to the national-level. This action of the state on behalf of its citizens to achieve this “national interest” is preconfigured into the security imaginary and insistently recalled to embody this act. Whenever there is a movement to frame a subject as a threat to the state, this similarly enables a standard configuration of common responses of this “security imaginary”. Framing a subject as a threat allows the actor not only engage it with the shared framework to deal with menaces, the use of violence, but also echoes on this “security imaginary”, reinforcing the state. Speeches and statements are crucial to observe this movement.

Ernesto Zedillo arrived at los Piños with a strong statement of “fixing” Mexico and the PRI in order to end corruption and fight the drug cartels. His plans were to restructure the institutional apparatus and the solid relationship between the government and the PRI. Therefore, fighting the traffic was one of the pillars of this plan. Zedillo inaugurates the formal use of the military against the narco-traffic as an interventionist measure, backed by discourses and substantially formulated strategies. The institutional corruption cleaning and the battle against narcotraffic structures become cornerstones of the Mexican governmental rhetoric.

In regards to his efforts to fight corruption, Zedillo would arrest the political and military leaders that had any connection with the traffic. Raúl Salinas, brother of former PRI president Carlos Salinas was arrested under several charges that he was involved with the cartels (Grayson, 2011, p. 49). The effort to understand drug cartels as

4 Weldes (1999, p.9) mentions Antonio Gramsci, who argues “Civil society is the sphere in which the struggle to define categories of common sense takes place”
a threat to Mexican national security was already present in Ernesto Zedillo inaugural speech on December 1st, 1994. The last PRI president on Los Pinos after 71 years linked his responsibility, as Head-Chief of State, to defend the national sovereignty, and the action of narco groups as the greatest threat to national security, serving as the main source of violence. The President stated:

“Como Jefe de Estado, mi primera responsabilidad será velar por la Soberanía nacional. (...) Asumo y ejerceré con honor el Comando Supremo de las Fuerzas Armadas, que continuarán sirviendo a México, con patriotismo, lealtad y eficacia (...) Es intolerable la impunidad del narcotráfico. El narcotráfico es la mayor amenaza a la seguridad nacional, el más grave riesgo para la salud social y la más cruenta fuente de violencia” (Zedillo, 1994).

Words such as “intolerable”, “greatest threat” and the “cruelest source of violence” are present to state a strong posture in order to face the cartels. Half year later, the president argued in the international day against the illicit drug traffic that cartels are the most dangerous and powerful threat to several areas of Mexican life:

El narcotráfico es la más grave amenaza para la integridad física, mental y moral de los jóvenes; el narcotráfico es la más grave amenaza a la salud de la sociedad; el narcotráfico es la más grave amenaza a la tranquilidad y el orden público; el narcotráfico es la más grave amenaza al Estado de Derecho; el narcotráfico es la más grave amenaza a nuestra seguridad nacional. Debemos estar conscientes de que al luchar contra el narcotráfico, estamos luchando contra el fenómeno de crimen organizado más poderoso, persistente, extendido y lucrativo en la historia de la humanidad. (Zedillo, 1995a, our emphasis)

In fact, Zedillo’s phrase “el narcotráfico es la más grave amenaza a nuestra seguridad nacional” repeated itself along their statements to national and international media outlets throughout his government. In his first “Informe de Gobierno” addressed to the congress on September 1st, 1995 that “Los mexicanos confiamos que cada nación cumpla su responsabilidad y nos sumaremos al esfuerzo global a través de una más efectiva cooperación internacional, pero, en cualquier caso, seguiremos combatiendo al narcotráfico con todos los instrumentos a nuestro alcance” (Zedillo, 1995b). These instruments were mainly a reinforcement to law and order, focusing in fighting the corruption on the layers of state power. Authority and legitimacy appeared also as institutional security and the end of permissive corruption.

---

5 We will not translate the discourses in order to preserve its original words and meaning.
6 In his Informe de Gobierno, Zedillo (1995ª) stated “En este sentido, con la reforma constitucional hemos dado un primer paso al establecer
Military power and the use of force began to emerge as an option with the progress between United State officials and the Mexican Government. This framework of action understood the cartels as a regional threat and an instability source, requiring joint action. The growth of the importance of the United States’ military and logistic support becomes evident when the US Secretary of Defense William Perry visits Mexico in October 1995. His objective was to assure the Mexican authorities that the use of the military was paramount for this kind of struggle (Grayson, 2011).

The operation to fight traffic with the use of military force was further developed in Vicente Fox and reached its peak with Felipe Calderon’s term. Fox, a former executive at Coca-Cola, was elected president in 2000 with the promise of freeing Mexico from corruption and violence and that he would bring new hope and new measures to deal with the traffic (Russell, 2010). He would then make extensive use of the military apparatus as the most innovative and fundamental solution for the issue. He acknowledged the fact that the El Narco was actually very organized and responses to it would have to be well structured. However, Fox lacked the political ability that would enable him to create alliances with the opposition. Thus, the Mexican people quickly lost their hope that Fox would bring some significant change (Grillo, 2011, p. 91).

In regards to fighting the traffic, Fox pursued Zedillo’s military policies with US support. The use of American consultancies inaugurated an era of military operations that would be characteristic of Calderón’s government in the future. The first conflicts between the Zetas and the Sinaloa happened during his administration. Fox sent 700 soldiers through an operation called Mexico Seguro aiming to end the violence in the region of Nuevo Laredo and to exhibit the army supremacy over the narco-

---

7 Bill Clinton (1996) stated “Los Estados Unidos y México están forjando una verdadera asociación, fundada en el respeto mutuo. Una asociación que es tan amplia, cuanto larga es nuestra frontera. La vemos tomando forma en la creación del NAFTA, en nuestro compromiso común en esta Convención para las Armas de Fuego, en nuestra Alianza contra Drug Cartelstrático y en nuestro trabajo con otras naciones americanas, para aumentar la cooperación multilateral y fortalecer las instituciones hemisféricas que combaten el flagelo de las drogas.”
traffickers capabilities. This operation remained important through his term, providing full support from federal government in the “struggle against drug cartels”.

The interventionist approach emerged more characteristically in Vicente Fox’s statements in the structure and power of the narco cartels. Fox had a powerful electoral support behind him and tried to seize this political momentum to state a strong posture in concerning this war. He began to use this word constantly to address the national counter-drug policy, also arguing that the threat narco cartel posed to Mexican security was enormous. This speech gave important directions to future approach of this administration. The President Fox (2002) argued in this program presentation: “El narcotráfico es un reto a la seguridad nacional, sus efectos amenazan la integridad de las familias, deterioran las instituciones y hacen que las comunidades sufran los embates de la delincuencia organizada.”, going further mentioning that “Esta es una guerra que debemos combatir en todos los frentes, no basta con atacar la oferta. También estamos impidiendo que aumente la demanda.”. This multifaced approach held by Fox further support the articulation of the war rhetoric.

It is important to notice the remarkable change of tone that this new policy brings into the debate. Institutional corruption cleansing, a traditional argument favored in the public opinion, is continuously brought together in complementation of a broader “crusade”. The very word “crusade” on the discourses brings an interesting notion: not only an intervention to restore the rightness and sacredness into the land, but also a moral duty of armed and faithful men. Fox articulates these elements in conjunction:

Por ello el compromiso que he asumido de luchar contra la corrupción es claro, es contundente. **En este Gobierno no hay impunidad para nadie.** Si descubrimos algún funcionario público que mantenga nexos con el narcotráfico, nos aseguraremos dentro del marco del derecho, de que **pague todo el daño social y político cometido contra México.** Ese compromiso es en todos los ámbitos de la administración pública y a todos los niveles. No hay dependencia ni jerarquía ajena a él. **Al responder el Ejército a este reclamo de la sociedad se fortalece aún más como institución. En la cruzada por la defensa del Estado de Derecho nos ponemos al día y a la vanguardia enfrentando los problemas de delincuencia e inseguridad a partir de un nuevo y moderno esquema en el que el uso exclusivo de la fuerza se transforma en el uso de la inteligencia.** (Fox, 2002, our emphasis)

---

8 Fox (2005) stated that in the appointment of the new Public Safety Secretary Mexico Seguro is a vital operation and the Federal Government gives it full material support.
9 Fox had a great appreciation to the word “cruzada”, in order to denote a battle or struggle against some issue. Searching for “una cruzada” gave 160 results into the search mode of http://fox.presidencia.gob.mx/actividades/discursos throughout his term.
Words that denote a direct hit to the cartels began to exist more frequently in Fox’s (2005) speeches alongside with data of drugs and arms apprehensions and captures of drug lords in several areas. At the appointment of the new Public Safety Secretary, Eduardo Medina-Mora Icaza, and the new Chief of Federal Preventive Police, General Eduardo Alejandro Martínez Aduna, Fox (2005) stated¹⁰ that it is the mission and duty of the Federal Government to win the battle against the narco cartels, recalling for a more efficient approach of the three layers of government in the “war” against delinquency. It was a “society” call for an answer that they should pay attention and abide to.

Felipe Calderón, on the other hand, emerged as a promising skilled politician, if compared with Fox. He was elected in 2006 while both violence and fear were looming quickly. Drugs cartels and their power were Calderón’s biggest challenge and it was out of control. His ultimate resource would be to intensify the use of the military apparatus to fight the narco-violence by the ostensive use of repression. If compared to the former presidents, Calderon’s administration focused to end the violence with a full implementation of military forces over Mexico. As he stated, drug cartels were a long incubated cancer that his government would eradicate¹¹.

Although opposition questioned the legitimacy of these elections, his inaugural speech and first months in office had to be quickly articulated. However, his confidence and strength towards dealing with the drug conflict was such that the population was immediately seduced (Grillo, 2011; Russell, 2010). Much of this strength gained emphasis in his speeches and became a priority on his administration. His speeches declared drug cartels as responsible for spreading fear among the population. Calderón usually mentioned that the Mexican state would bring peace back to the people and this “war” became a priority. Investments would focus mostly on building up the Mexican

¹⁰ Fox mentioned at the ceremony: “Eduardo (...) Te instruyo a continuar y mejorar el Programa México Seguro con todos los recursos y elementos disponibles del Gobierno Federal. Este programa es fundamental en nuestra lucha. Te instruyo a elevar los niveles de coordinación con los estados y los municipios responsables también de la seguridad. Los tres órdenes de Gobierno tenemos que cumplir responsabilidades en el ejercicio de nuestras competencias y atribuciones, por ello, es preciso seguir apoyando a los gobiernos locales en la profesionalización de sus policías, seguir aumentando el presupuesto y los recursos disponibles para seguridad. La sociedad entera espera de nosotros, de los gobiernos estatales, de los gobiernos municipales, mayor eficacia en la guerra contra la delincuencia. Nuestra misión es ganar esta batalla y sé que lo vamos a hacer. Esta lucha es por México, es por nuestros hijos y nuestro futuro, con su trabajo y compromiso yo sé que así será.”

¹¹ Jutta Weldes gives an important account on the appropriation of the medical language to address a subject as a threat. See more in Weldes, J. Constructing National Interests. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1999.
army so that it would be prepared to fight this war against the enemies of the Mexican people.

This was in the core of his political strategy, and he intended to, initially, disengage the trafficking and its profits. There would be no more condescendence towards it as during the PRI era. In 2007, Calderon deployed over 40,000 soldiers to Michoacán, changing substantially the enforcement’s tone (Grayson, 2011, p. 119). His speeches portray these actions as a struggle of the good against the greater evil. Narco-traffic was a threat against the existence of the Mexican state as well as their control over the territory. It was not just a matter of criminal activity anymore. They had become enemies of the state and of the population (Grillo, 2011):

Que se oiga fuerte y que se oiga lejos: seguiremos utilizando toda la fuerza del Estado para responder a los que buscan envenenar el cuerpo y el alma de nuestros hijos, para responder a los que intentan sembrar zozobra, temor y muerte entre mexicanos y para responder a los que pretenden decidir desde la ilegalidad el destino de la nación (...) ni remotamente pensamos en abandonar la plaza al enemigo; por el contrario, todos los días estamos arrancando a la delincuencia espacios que pertenecen a los ciudadanos y lo hacemos porque en el servicio a la patria no hay ni titubeos ni regateos” (Calderon, 2008a).

In the meanwhile, the military operations had pre-determined prioritized areas to act: Chihuahua, Baja California, Sonora, Choahuila, Nuevo Leon, Tamaulipas and Sinaloa, historic territories under cartel control. Under these circumstances, every sector of the Mexican society was under a constant threat and violence kept rising. The figures illustrate how both murders and kidnaps increased from 2005 to 2006. Journalists were also facing serious risks and their death tolls were looming (Shirk, 2009). His speech still emphasized his role in protecting Mexican families from the traffic. But he recognizes the difficulties he had been facing at the time, and that the challenge is growing bigger. His administration, therefore, despite the military efforts, was responsible for the increase of violence. Death tolls reached records in 2010 and 2011 (Molzahn et all, 2011).

In a broadcast to the Mexican people, in July 15th, 2010, President Calderón used this pronouncement to first to define the situation as an appalling threat to follow justify the use and cost of military force. This speech is particularly interesting once it gives an account on Calderon’s Cabinet assessment of the Mexican political landscape.
Calderón addresses that the battle against the *El Narco* is a long fight that brought a wave of casualties and fear over the Mexican people. According to the statement, a new organizational cartel structure arose in the mid-90’s overrunning the low-profile drug traffic that served only to USA drug market. This “new reality” made not only these delinquents threat each other over the control of those territories, but also the state authority and society. The turning point in the animosity of the violence in Mexico was a direct product of the 2004 United States Assault Rifle withdraw that allowed these subjects to buy powerful armament and bring it back to Mexico to serve their purposes.

The uprising of violence was, therefore, not due an internal lack of control or economic dynamic inside Mexico’s borders, but an external factor that enables this “tumor” to grow. Calderón argues throughout this speech that this situation was the current situation when he took office. This speech in particular presented a powerful articulation of citizen protection as the primordial duty of the State and was, in fact, the ultimate justification for all this “costly operation”. The State authority suffers the equivalent threat as the Mexican society do. The security imaginary previously mentioned also embody, in this sense, a battle that aims to protect its fellow citizens. Its conclusion shows this tone:

> A través de la historia, los mexicanos hemos vencido a muchos enemigos. A éste también lo derrotaremos. Hoy el país está una vez más a prueba y la vamos a superar, porque somos más, muchos más los mexicanos que queremos un México libre, un México seguro, un México en paz. Por eso, mi Gobierno está absolutamente decidido a seguir combatiendo sin tregua a la criminalidad hasta conseguir ese México que queremos. Con tu apoyo, lo vamos a lograr. **La lucha vale la pena. La razón de esta lucha eres tú y tu familia.** Muchas gracias. (Calderón, 2010, our emphasis)

Both state and population are targets of the narco cartels. There is an permanent framing of a battle to survive, a struggle that if not conduct properly with full dedication and strength would result and the fall of Mexican society. Joint military operations in order to bring “peace and security” to the cities became a central point to Calderon’s policies, resulting in 33 operations from 2006 to 2009 (Grayson, 2011, p. 165-171). It is important to understand these operations as the fundamental counter-policy that the Mexican government undertook against drug cartels. Military operations had a mission to control the insecurity landscape that the cartels brought over Mexico,

---

also stating that the long evil of corruption was on counter-measures’ radar as well. In a 2008 pronouncement, Calderón argued:

Desde mi primer día como Presidente, la seguridad ha sido la más alta prioridad de mi Gobierno, no hay otro tema al cual estemos prestando más atención y aumentando cada día los recursos humanos y económicos para resolverlo. Estamos completamente decididos a recuperar la seguridad, la autoridad y el orden en las calles y en las plazas del país. Por esa razón iniciamos y realizamos los Operativos Conjuntos, en los que hemos utilizado todos los recursos del Estado para lograrlo. (...) no descansaremos hasta que tú te sientas seguro en la ciudad en que vives. Estamos también apostando por limpiar, depurar y profesionalizar los cuerpos policíacos, porque no hay nada que agravie más a los ciudadanos que la corrupción y, particularmente, cuando la corrupción está en la policía. (Calderón, 2008b)

Territory control was fundamental once there was no “order into the streets” of the country. Calderón insisted to portray a no-man’s land emerged from this unwanted part of Mexican political body. The allegory of “social cancer” that the president highlights articulates this idea of “disease”, an affliction on the society that must be eradicated, cured. The rhetoric gained further support with United States statements on drug issues. Drug Enforcement Agency Chief of Operations stated that Calderón was a “hero” to fight these delinquents and to refuse to negotiate. George W. Bush, a long allied on the subject, constantly reiterate the bravery and necessity to tackle drug cartels in order to reinstate stability into Mexico and North America. Bush played the rhetoric of the war on terror to embody the drugs counter-policies as well, mentioning at the Mérida reunion, in Yucatán state that the boundary between these countries must be a place where drugs, guns and terror would not spread\textsuperscript{13}. Their alliance over conservative issues linked the protection of the continent with the general understand that drugs and terrorism posed threats and should be treated alike (De Rosa, 2012).

Calderón’s rhetoric also often referred to the former presidents and their inability to deal with the traffic. However, he repeated most of the same tactics used by them such as interdictions and extraditions. His rhetoric also used the “War on Drugs” terminology as a tool to seduce the population and gain its broad support. This rhetoric was also used jointly with Bush, whose concern with his borders was translated into supporting Calderón (Grayson, 2011). The Merida Initiative emerged from this relationship. Mexico was at the risk of becoming a failed state, while the number of murders had grown over 100%.

\textsuperscript{13}
Observing the statements made from Zedillo’s to Calderón’s administration, there is an indicative of military power as a fundamental instrument to restore State security over this threat placed by drug cartels. This indication grew with the power displayed by the cartels, reaching its peak during the Calderón’s administration. It is in this political landscape that drug-traffic changes from an impediment to development of the state to a fundamental threat over Mexican sovereignty and authority. State authorities, mainly the Calderon Cabinet, portrayed this uprising of violence as an affliction over the “normal” order of things; characterized as a disease to state body that must be eradicated by force.

The general assessment made by Mexican officials was a chaotic scenario, where the rule of the law no longer existed. There was no security over streets and an energetic measure, profoundly defended by allies on the region, was overdue. This rhetoric understood the domestic scenario as a battle for survival where cartels posed a serious threat to the State as a ruler. Force became the logical answer to fight this enemy, as it was, a physical threat to the existence of the State. The question and their responses remained embedded on a strictly physical threat of these drug cartels to “society as Mexico”; this is, as State and its political body was consonant. A deep net of structures endured unabated strong, giving subsidies to an everyday scenario of violence.

After a violent confront between Mexico’s forces and drug cartels’ men, there was still an environment of increasing violence spreading fear among the population. In 2005, the number of murders related to narco-trafficking was of 1776. In 2006, it grew to 2006, a 20% growth. Kidnaps also increased 20% between 2007 and 2008. In 2007, the average of dead journalists was of 3 per month. The image below illustrates the amount of deaths related to traffic over the selected years:

Figure 1. Number of deaths related to the narco-trafficking.  
(Shirk, 2009, p.4).
Concluding remarks

The present essay aimed to understand the role of the Mexican state and its government into creating an environment of a “War on Drugs”. Our research found that military force and violence played an important role as public policies to reinstate institutional power and legitimacy. At the top of the conflict, the narco-cartels posed a threat to the Mexican sovereignty and United States feared the emergence of a failed state by its borders. While the government would increase its military apparatus and responses to the violent acts perpetrated by the cartels, the violence did not drop or substantially decrease.

With this in mind, we tried to question such public policies adopted by the government once they do not address further ramifications of the subject. They do not encompass why the narco-violence has grown into such dimension, why they act through brutality and massive violence. State’s military action just increased over time in order to manage this, however, homicides related to traffic exponentially increased, posing serious questions over this logic. Both instances of the conflict, the cartels and the government, use it as an instrument of power, whereas theses parties on the conflict could not reach an end to it. The United States, also an important actor in this conflict, is the main consumer market of the drugs that leave Mexico. Therefore, their interest in also finding solutions to the issue led them to offer broad military support to the Mexican government, feeding this whole cycle of violence.

Through the Mexican officials’ speeches, we could advance on an examination of this violent rhetoric emerged. More specifically, we could observe how these statements articulated El Narco as a legitimate threat in face of the population. In a more comprehensive analysis, observing how these leaders used a common imaginary of security and threat, we could assess that they were able to mobilize the actions and address it as something that was disrupting the Mexican society. In sum, analyzing the speeches pronounced in this development, we could observe that a detailed construction of a general threat to Mexico and its society made possible the securitization process over drug cartels operation, convincing internal and external audience of the imperative use of military force.
References


FOX, V. Nombra el Presidente Fox al licenciado Eduardo Medina-Mora Icaza, como secretario de Seguridad Pública, September 27, 2005 http://fox.presidencia.gob.mx/actividades/discursos/?contenido=20926


WELDES, J. *Constructing National Interests*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1999

ZEDILLO, E. Día Internacional Contra el Uso Indebido y el Tráfico Ilícito de Drogas June 26, 1995 a zedillo.presidencia.gob.mx/pages/disc/jun95/26jun95.html